

# Mapping a perfect storm: The impact of COVID-19 on Asia's media landscape

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How are brands changing the way they communicate with consumers? A look at how major media channels have been used during COVID-19 lockdowns across Asia.

- Facebook enjoyed a 69% usership amongst all internet users in India, and 79% usership across Asia.
- The 'ESL India Premiership' Tournament, one of the marquee e-sports properties in India, saw a record growth in the number of registrations – up by 414% over last year.
- COVID-19 related content on YouTube saw a whopping increase of 98% in terms of views and 199% in terms of engagement from India.

## Marketing in the COVID-19 crisis

This article is part of a special WARC Snapshot focused on enabling brand marketers to re-strategise amid the unprecedented disruption caused by the novel coronavirus outbreak.

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## Why it matters

Consumers have plenty of time to consume content, but there are fewer opportunities to buy – a situation compounded by furloughs, job cuts and collapsing income for businesses small and large. Marketers will need to rethink their usual media mix and start getting creative about how to use predominantly digital channels to deliver a consistent brand experience and stay top of mind.

## Takeaways

- At a time when most of us are facing both personal and professional hardships, creating interesting and positive stories can help in increasing brand affinity.
- Many brands are creating content focused around daily activities and interests, to accompany consumers spending more time at home, while travel brands are recreating destination experiences online.
- Health and fitness content have grown exponentially in line with both consumer demand and creator communities jumping on to the opportunity.

Who would have thought as we were ushering in the New Year, that within two months, our lives would be upended by a virus called COVID-19?

The pandemic has been accompanied by an information epidemic, which shows no signs of slowing down even as some nations across Asia make a careful return to normalcy. News has gushed at us from TV screens to WhatsApp forwards, contributing significantly to anxiety levels.

As governments struggled to contain the spread, new rules and notifications – many confusing to families and businesses – were communicated through a plethora of channels. We were asked to download apps that tracked and warned us. We remained glued to our TV and mobile screens as government officials issued daily updates, doctors tried to reassure us while leaders commanded people to stay home and galvanized billions to applaud health workers for their heroism.

As people went into lockdown, stayed home and began working from home, their entire engagement with digital media changed. But as demand for many products and services, from travel to eating out to consumer durables to automobiles collapsed it has created the perfect storm.

Consumers have plenty of time to consume content, but there are fewer opportunities to buy – a situation compounded by furloughs, job cuts and collapsing income for businesses small and large. As many markets attempt a tentative return to normalcy, we are aware that normalcy is a fair distance away.

In this paper, I look at the changes in media engagement, what is driving those changes and how some brands have been able to leverage the crisis to care for their customers and society.

## Television

As markets locked down, TV viewership surged. India's total TV consumption in the week starting March 21, rose 37% over the pre-COVID period (Jan. 11-31) to 1.2 trillion minutes, the highest-ever. Average daily viewers grew by 62 million during the period.

Average viewership for TV news witnessed a massive 219% jump for the week between 4 April and 10 April compared to average viewership of January this year<sup>[i]</sup>. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's fourth address on lockdown extension garnered four billion viewing minutes, the highest among his four addresses on COVID-19.

In China, news viewing has almost doubled in 2020 – 1,413 mins vs. 727 mins in 2019<sup>[ii]</sup>.

As the lockdown was eased and the situation normalised, TV viewership has mostly returned to their previous levels in China, Philippines and Sri Lanka – but not in Vietnam and Bangladesh, where they remain higher compared with last year.

With the news being flooded with fear and uncertainty, some TV channels decided to counter this with stories of

hope and positivity. In Sri Lanka, Dentsu Grant Group tied up with local TV channel Swarnavahini and launched *Happy News on Live@8* – the main news program. Launched on 25 April, this special two-minute news segment, featured some of Sri Lanka's most popular influencers and celebrities, broadcast stories of optimism for viewers. A stripped-back look into these personalities' lives was featured on national television along with their views on how to stay positive during the lockdown. Some stars wrote songs about their experiences, while others introduced their media-shy family members to the audience.

As content studios stopped their shoots, Indian TV saw the return of the mythological epic *Ramayana*, first aired in the 1980s, recording 51 million viewers for the episode aired on 29 March. The re-telecast of *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana* resulted in nearly 40,000% jump in viewership in the evening and morning bands on state-run broadcaster Doordarshan in the week ending April 3<sup>[iii]</sup>.

The biggest ad spenders during this period were consumer packaged goods (CPG) companies such as Hindustan Unilever, ITC, Reckitt Benckiser (top three in the last week of May). Other significant advertisers included the insurance player Policybazar.com, online education companies and other CPG firms like Godrej Consumer Products Limited, Procter & Gamble, Wipro Ltd, Colgate Palmolive and the dairy brand Amul, which doubled its marketing spends, diverting advertising budgets from general entertainment channels to news channels due to the increased consumption of news channels during the outbreak.

As the lockdown was lifted and distribution and supply chain restrictions eased, e-commerce player Amazon as well as home appliance companies began advertising as well.

## YouTube

During the lockdown in India, YouTube saw a 20.5% surge in its subscriber base within a span of 45 days. COVID-19 related content saw a whopping increase of 98% in terms of views and 199% in terms of engagement. The greatest increase was seen in food and recipe content, as well as health and fitness categories. These ranged from how to increase one's immunity to how to make a certain kind of drink at home. 'How to' videos grew by 110%<sup>[iv]</sup>.

Videos that did well on YouTube included Dhruv Rathee's *Coronavirus | Explained* and FitTuber's *Coronavirus – Everything You Need to Know (The Truth)*. Uploads in the education category grew by 120% as more schoolchildren looked for ways to keep busy, as much as those working from home sought to augment their skills.

With people trying to stay fit without stepping out, fitness videos became 170% more popular, compared with their previous daily average. Titles like 'home' and 'no gym' were trending and were picked up by popular fitness and lifestyle YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia, better known as #BeerBiceps, with 4.4 million subscribers across his two channels. As he recognised that the game would be to put out videos consistently, he began racking up 1500-1600 views even during a slow week.

Some of the most engaging activities on YouTube have been around music. In Vietnam, the health ministry put out a video featuring a pop song about how to prevent COVID-19 was so catchy that it went viral. With lyrics and music by composer Khắc Hưng, and sung by MIN and Erik, the video has been viewed more than 5 million times.

In South Korea, fans of the K-Pop band BTS were given the chance to experience the group's concerts online,

on a platform called “Bang Bang Con” in place of their postponed tour. The online concerts were streamed on the same dates as their cancelled show in Seoul. Fans could also stream previous BTS concerts for free on YouTube. The two-day online concert amassed over 50 million views.

On 30 April, hundreds of thousands of live viewers in India tuned in to One Nation India. The online event assembled renowned YouTube creators, musicians, sportspeople, and entertainers to raise funds for PM CARES, a public charitable trust aimed at COVID-19 relief. The 11.5-hour marathon show featured singing, dancing, and cooking, and reached 18.4 million views<sup>[v]</sup>.

In Singapore, IKEA took a different route, releasing the short film *Making Home Count* on YouTube to honour those who were doing their part in staying home.

## Facebook

Thanks to the lockdown, the average person in India has been spending more than four hours online every day as compared to the previous average of 1.5 hours. Social networking platform Facebook enjoyed a 69% usership amongst all internet users in India, and 79% usership across Asia<sup>[vi]</sup>.

Brands have been engaging with their Facebook communities through a range of activities, on Facebook Live.

Content studio Lionsgate India and Facebook partnered and launched *Lionsgate Live! A Night at the Movies* - a month-long campaign featuring four Fridays of complimentary movies which were streamed LIVE on Facebook. This initiative was designed to bring the community experience of watching movies in movie theatres to live streaming. The screenings raised funds for GiveIndia, a consolidated NGO platform working towards the rehabilitation of COVID-19 victims. Viewers were able to donate while they watched their favourite movie, via the Facebook Fundraisers tool.

In addition, *Twilight* series star, Peter Facinelli and *Now You See Me* franchise's Jesse Eisenberg shared video messages to extend their support to Lionsgate India. The studio and Facebook also brought on board Bollywood celebrities like Ananya Pandey, Anil Kapoor, Sanya Malhotra and Raveena Tandon.

Southeast Asia's popular cruise line Dream Cruises launched *Dream Cruises At Home* on Facebook Live, featuring its crew members and performers on board as they showcased a series of cooking, freestyle dance and cultural performances. With two new episodes a week between May to June, homebound travellers were able learn freestyle dance moves from a Dream Cruises' dancer, learn to make their own Merlion Sling with an on-board bartender, get entertained with an exciting Japanese Taiko drum show by a highly-acclaimed drummer, and sweat it out in a full body home workout with Dream Cruise's fitness trainer.

The cruise company shot content around an array of activities, from a Bachata dance performance featuring the popular dance style from the Dominican Republic, to the ship's chefs and bartenders whipping up recipes and cocktails. Those trying to exercise their vocals were also able to tune into vocal lessons conducted by a professional singer.

With the travel ban and social distancing measures continuing, Thailand based spa Six Senses video tutorials on Facebook Live. *At Home with Six Senses* offers a dose of much-needed calm and positivity to support everyone's well-being during this time. The campaign features short videos such as yoga and stretching, drum journey meditation, how to grill meat, and a cold brew coffee demonstration by the team at Six Senses.

## Gaming

As a consequence of COVID-19, online gaming has increased by leaps and bounds. Gaming is typically an at-home activity, and headlines reveal that it is flourishing during the pandemic.

Asian gaming giants Nintendo and Tencent both saw sales increases during the first quarter. The former increased profits by 41%, selling almost half of its games digitally<sup>[vii]</sup>, while there was a 31% year-on-year increase in Tencent's online gaming revenue<sup>[viii]</sup>.

This has encouraged gaming companies to release new titles during the pandemic, with games like Doom Eternal and Animal Crossing breaking sales records. Data from Comcast suggests that new game downloads grew by 80%, while total gaming downloads showed a 50% rise.

With COVID-19 causing cancellations of e-sports tournaments throughout China, and slowing down manufacturing of video game consoles, in-home games have gained popularity. The total game downloads on Apple's app store in China increased 27.5% year over year and revenue rose by 12.1%<sup>[ix]</sup>.

The 'ESL India Premiership' Tournament, one of the marquee e-sports properties in India, saw a record growth in the number of registrations – up by 414% over last year. The 2020 edition of the tournament featured popular games such as Counter-Strike, FIFA 20, PUBG and Clash of Clans as gamers from all over the country registered to participate in the competition.

Evos Esports, an e-sports organisation in Southeast Asia, recently launched several COVID-19 charity initiatives in partnership with the Southeast Asia esports and gaming community.

In Indonesia, Evos Esports organised charity matches between their Indonesia and Singapore Mobile Legends: Bang Bang teams. They successfully raised nearly 100 million rupiah which was donated to various charities at the front line of the COVID-19 battle. In Thailand, EVOS Esports' ROV (Realm of Valor) team joined EVOS Esports professional e-sports athlete Sandee to cook and deliver three thousand boxed meals to the slum areas.

## Instagram

COVID-19 has helped Instagram gain a 40% surge in views, with views of Instagram Live doubling in a week. Users across geographies are tuning in to live events, sharing updates and supporting one another with posts and comments.

With posts about coronavirus flooding social media, it is essential for brands and influencers to use proper and relevant hashtags to increase visibility and engagement. Hashtags like #Coronavirus, #COVID-19, #Corona, #CoronavirusPandemic, #SocialDistancing, #SelfQuarantine, #Lockdown, #StayHome, #StaySafe, etc. are a few trending hashtags being used.

At a time when most of us are facing both personal and professional hardships, creating interesting stories for Instagram followers can help in increasing brand affinity. Instagram Stories can include games, social trends, contests, informative videos and others – anything to keep the audience engaged and entertained.

Television actress and Instagram influencer Shruti Seth used Instagram to promote Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Janata (common person) curfew' and stay-at-home message in her video post. With over

380,000 followers, the actress cleans her home using Dyson India vacuum cleaner, while promoting self-quarantine and doing a subtle plug for the brand as she talks about keeping one's surroundings clean.

Reebok India works with celebrity fitness trainer and Yasmin Karachiwala and actress Katrina Kaif to post small Workout From Home videos on Instagram, while fashion brand Lakme posts various games for women, encouraging people to keep in mind norms of social distancing and self-quarantine.

Likewise, insurance broker Futuready ran a series of posts about the New Normal – focusing on social distancing and wearing masks when shopping and going to work in Indonesia. They also provide a hotline number for speedy service.

## TikTok

Just like the other apps, perhaps more than them, the pandemic gave a massive boost to TikTok's popularity. During the first quarter of 2020, TikTok was downloaded 315 million times<sup>[x]</sup>, which is a quarterly record for any app. Outside China, the largest market for TikTok is India, where the app has been downloaded a whopping 611 million times.

Until the recent ban, in the wake of rising political and military tensions between India and China. As public anger against Chinese business grew, the Indian government banned 58 apps, including TikTok and WeChat, which they believed were collecting data on users and sending it to China.

TikTok's popularity is simply due to its very approachable and quirky creators, like Khan Tariq, who has eight million followers and is known for his creative photoshoots, and Sameeksha Sud, a former TV actress turned YouTube star. Reckitt Benckiser's hygiene brand Dettol has been running the #HandWashingChallenge campaign on TikTok, featuring Sud and celebrities like Kartik Aryan and Urvashi Rautela. Tariq's huge following has Bollywood stars seeking him out to promote their films.

Driven by the pandemic, health and fitness videos are **growing in popularity**, thanks to their creators. Kavita Makhija's (@imkavy) dance video, set to an EDM track, as she stands on top of a wall in grey leggings and a black top, raked in 11 million views and 350000 likes.

In India, TikTok has been leveraged by brands such as Dettol and Lifebuoy (#LifeKorona), the government and international organizations (WHO #SafeHands, UNDP India #GharBaithoIndia) alike.

TikTok's popularity is on the upswing in Asia's third-largest market – Indonesia. The app has recorded 4.6 billion views for special content using the hashtags #SamaSamaDiRumah (together at home) and #Pahlawangardadepan (frontline heroes), featuring content in support of medical workers. Videos tagged with #SamaSamaDiRumah home recipes, Korean language lessons and concerts with singers performing at home.

With Asian audiences showing an insatiable appetite for content, almost every media platform across Asia, apart from cinema, is set for ever-deeper engagement. If they don't get entangled in politics.

## Sources

[i] BARC-Nielsen 4<sup>th</sup> edition 2020

[ii] Kantar/CSM

[iii] **DD viewership increases by 40,000 per cent, all thanks to the return of Ramayan and Mahabharat** (India TV News, 16 April 2020)

[iv] Mindshare & Vidooly

[v] **Now at home, people bring their offline passions online with YouTube** (Think With Google, June 2020)

[vi] **Social Media Stats Asia May 2019 - June 2020, statcounter**

[vii] **Nintendo collects lockdown power-up as sales shift online** (Financial Times, 8 May 2020)

[viii] Source: Tencent

[ix] Source: Sensor Tower

[x] Source: Sensor Tower

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